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**Ranking Member**  
**Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**  
**“Business As Usual? Belarus on the Eve of Elections”**  
**September 16, 2008**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and welcome to our witnesses and guests this afternoon.

Less than two weeks before elections to Belarus’ National Assembly, President Lukashenka has given us few signs that these elections will be different from other elections held under his rule, which have fallen far short of OSCE standards. Once again, the opposition finds officials restricting its campaign activities, and opposition candidates have little access to the state-dominated media. Some opposition candidates have been denied registration, while other potential opposition candidates have suddenly found themselves unemployed.

Of course, we welcome the Belarussian government’s recent release of some political prisoners, including Aleksandr Kazulin, and the inclusion of a few members of the opposition on precinct election commissions. But given President Lukashenka’s record as Europe’s last dictator and leading abuser of human rights, we shouldn’t create false hopes that these gestures portend a new springtime for democracy in Belarus.

In his long tenure as President of Belarus, Lukashenka has liquidated his country’s democratically elected parliament and conducted a series of phony, stage-managed elections. His government has trampled on elementary human rights such as freedom of expression, association and assembly. He has harassed and arrested opposition activists, closed down NGOs, stifled the independent media, and restricted religious freedom. I particularly recall the “disappearance” of several opposition leaders in 1999 and 2000—people who have never been seen since and whose cases have never been solved.

The catalog of Lukashenka’s crimes is all the more reason for our government to stand by the suffering people of Belarus. We have to continue to support the efforts of brave Belarussians to build their civil society and to break Lukashenka’s media monopoly. Here our government has a vital role to play, by technically and financially

supporting international broadcasting that provides Belarussians with objective news about their country.

In recent years I have met many Belarussian democrats and human rights activists and am convinced that the Belarussian people will take back their country and integrate it into the family of democratic nations—and that this will happen sooner than Lukashenka thinks.